

# Recent work on Leibniz's investigations into the natural languages

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*Abstract:* This contribution offers a succinct overview of Leibniz's interest in the 'natural' languages. The first section examines, by way of introduction, the significance attached to the topic of language in biographies of Leibniz throughout time. The second section focuses on recent specialized literature in the historiography of linguistics and explores to what extent new insights are giving way to a reassessment of Leibniz's objectives, methods, and beliefs. Finally, the third section outlines some new avenues for research.

*Keywords:* Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Linguistic kinship, Methodology of linguistics, Linguistic Change, Primeval language.

## 0. *A Premise*

[Leibniz's] researches into linguistics and etymology seem a regrettable distraction to those approaching Leibniz primarily as a brilliant metaphysician and mathematician. [...] But a more holistic approach finds that these linguistic researches, like virtually all his major endeavours, were not conceived as ends in themselves but were undertaken as means of pursuing Leibniz's most fundamental objectives. (Antognazza 2009: 363-4)

This quote, taken from the most recent English Leibniz biography, is illuminating in more than one respect. It states that Leibniz actively conducted investigations into the histories and kinship of the world's natural languages. It also proposes that contemporary scholars interested in Leibniz, the majority of whom are philosophers, do not always share his particular linguistic interest. Finally, it advocates that Leibniz's attention paid to linguistics is an integral part of his all-encompassing master plan. Indeed, one of the main

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aims of Antognazza's intellectual biography consists in bringing to light the 'hidden' major coherent plan underlying and underpinning Leibniz's incredibly extensive array of diverse scholarly projects he was engaged in. She argues that Leibniz was predominantly concerned with attaining a fundamentally better world and this in all respects. To what extent does the study of languages contribute to the improvement of the world? The conclusion of this contribution will address this question.

The present contribution endeavors to provide a succinct overview on Leibniz's interest in the 'natural' languages. It roughly falls into three parts. A brief introductory section surveys to what extent general biographies of (and introductions to) Leibniz have informed their readers on this topic throughout time, thus likewise permitting us to outline Leibniz's basic tenets in this respect. The second part focuses on recent specialized literature in the historiography of linguistics and explores to what extent new insights are giving way to a reassessment of Leibniz's objectives, methods, and beliefs. This section, having its emphasis on the timespan 1994-2014, makes no claim of being novel nor does it seek to offer an exhaustive survey. Not only would such a balanced overview from a bird's-eye perspective require a profound familiarity with the entirety of Leibniz's published and unpublished writings, including his language philosophical ideas, which at first sight might appear unrelated to his more empirical projects<sup>1</sup>, but it would also demand, as I will argue in this paper, a firm understanding of the ideas expressed by Leibniz's predecessors and contemporaries. By highlighting some avenues for further research, the final segment focuses on what is yet unknown and on what is still to be achieved.

<sup>1</sup> In the wake of an influential study of Albert Heinekamp (1972), Stefano Gensini has stressed the connection between Leibniz's interest in language philosophy on the one hand and language history on the other throughout his works. De Buzon (2012: 383) elegantly describes the connection as «une grande porosité entre des domaines apparemment séparés du savoir». Maat (2014) sees in Leibniz's study of rational grammar the interface between his 'empirical' and 'universal' language projects. See also Waldhoff (2014: 269) and Li (2014a: 11-7, with further references given). Poser (2000) argues that the entirety of linguistic ideas developed by Leibniz is to be regarded as a foundational contribution to the emergence of the concept of Enlightenment.

# 1. *The role of language in introductions to (or biographies of) Leibniz*

Hans Poser (2005: 111) has stated that Leibniz's biographers have often glossed over his study of languages<sup>2</sup>. All the same, a considerable number of biographies do pay attention to his interest in linguistics. A succinct overview will allow us both to outline the basic tenets of Leibniz's linguistic ideas and to show in what various ways these biographies handle the topic 'Leibniz and language'. The classic Leibniz biography by Gottschalk Eduard Guhrauer (1845), here in a condensed English translation by J.M. Mackie, offers, for its time, an astonishingly accurate account:

At the same time Leibnitz was engaged in these Historical researches, he also devoted some portion of his leisure to the investigation of the origin and connection of languages. In this latter field of inquiry, his labors cannot fail to excite admiration, not only on account of the scientific tact which guided him in his combinations, but also the unbounded extent of his researches, stretching in fact over the universal history of the human race. As has been mentioned before, he spent some considerable time on his project of an universal philosophical language; and later in life, etymology became with him a means of playful recreation. [...] Still more instructive were the applications of his linguistic learning to the subjects of the origin of the different human races, and of their historical and geographical relations to each other. Looking upon the languages of the various tribes as the principal documents in inquiries of this sort, he pointed out two methods of procedure, – one the collecting together the greatest possible amount of information respecting the languages themselves; and the other, the application to them of scientific principles of etymology. In the first direction, the activity of Leibnitz was almost without limits. Missionaries, travellers, ambassadors and kings were taxed to enable him to carry his inquiries into the most distant regions of the globe, especially into Asia, the cradle of the human race. In investigating the dialects of barbarous tribes, he generally made the Lord's prayer the basis of his interrogatories. (Guhrauer 1845: 203-4)

It is noteworthy to discover that the majority of later biographers also tend to connect Leibniz's investigations into the natural languages with his historical endeavors, thus in many cases disconnecting these explorations from his language philosophical initiatives

<sup>2</sup> «Oft genug wurde in den Leibnizdarstellungen dessen intensive Beschäftigung mit den unterschiedlichsten Sprachen dieser Erde nicht einmal erwähnt». See for instance Brunswig (1925). Piat (1915: 75) limits himself to a short allusion.

and his proposals on the ‘cultivation’ of the German language<sup>3</sup>. (In general, most attention is paid to Leibniz’s attempts to design a universal philosophical language)<sup>4</sup>. Such a distinct treatment can be easily accounted for, given that Leibniz laid different scholarly emphases in the various stages of his life. It is, therefore, only logical that such trends and shifts are also mirrored in chronologically arranged biographies. All the same, a few general introductions to Leibniz likewise highlight the ultimate unity of Leibniz’s ideas on language, the most notable of which is Poser (2005), devoting a separate and central chapter on ‘Cognition and language’ (91-120)<sup>5</sup>. It is good to see that more recent biographies in their discussion of Leibniz’s ideas on the natural languages do incorporate the results published in the work of, most notably, Sigrid von der Schulenburg, Hans Aarsleff, and Stefano Gensini. Their publications keep playing a prominent role in recent specialized studies too, whose main conclusions are outlined in the following section.

## 2. Recent studies undertaken (ca. 1994-2014)

The last twenty years have witnessed a considerable progress in disclosing, editing, translating, and commenting Leibnizian key texts. The best-known and presumably best-studied text in which Leibniz expresses his ideas on natural languages is his 1710 *Brevis designatio de originibus gentium, ductis potissimum ex indicio linguarum*. The text has meanwhile been translated in Italian (Gensini 1995b: 173-94), German (Babin & Van Den Heuvel 2004: 354-89), French (Crépon 2000: 171-93; see, however, the criticism voiced by De Buzon 2012: 385), and Portuguese (Cecci Silva & de Siqueira Piavi 2012: 125-49; see also the introduction by Pombo 2012). Both Crépon (2000) and Gensini (1995b) offer an anthology of key texts and letters in which Leibniz discusses the harmony of the natural

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Kiefl (1913: 26-7), Hirsch (2000: 311-5). Huber (1951: 246-7) treats Leibniz’s language philosophical studies and his empirical studies together, while also emphasizing the ultimately historical aims of the latter.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Aiton (1985: *passim*), who only succinctly deals with the natural languages (Aiton 1985: 214-5). See also Antognazza (2009: *passim*) and the comments by Gensini (1995a: 3).

<sup>5</sup> Two multi-authored companions to Leibniz also contain a section devoted to Leibniz and language, viz. Weimann (1966) and Rutherford (1995).

languages. After publishing a preliminary edition and a first Italian translation of Leibniz's most extensive unpublished dissertation devoted to the natural languages (Gensini 1991), Stefano Gensini has continued to work on the *Epistolica dissertatio* (see Gensini 2000a: chapter IV; Gensini 2000b; Gensini 2014). Leibniz would have used this dissertation as a preface to his *Collectanea Etymologica* (1717), if death had not intervened. Its posthumous editor, Johann Georg von Eckhardt, resolved to replace it with an introduction of his own, once he discovered Leibniz had criticized Eckhardt's etymological work in this very *Epistolica dissertatio*<sup>6</sup>. So far, less attention has been given to these *Collectanea Etymologica* as such<sup>7</sup>. This highly composite work, however, also comprises two shorter dissertations by Leibniz in German and on German, which have received some recent consideration. Luckscheiter (2014a) presents a brief analysis of *Unvorgreifliche Gedancken betreffend die Ausübung und Verbesserung der deutschen Sprache* (composed ca. 1698) by contrasting it to Ernst Moritz Arndt's views, and Antoine (2014) addresses the background and reception of the posthumously published text entitled *Ermahnung an die Teutsche, ihren Verstand und Sprache beßer zu üben* (see also Stuckenbrock 2005 [*passim*] and Świączkowska 2005, 2010). An invaluable recent instrument fostering considerable future research into Leibniz's views on the natural languages is Stefan Luckscheiter's (2014b) survey of primary sources. Whereas the contribution's title (*Leibniz' Schriften zur Sprachforschung*) seems to imply that both language philosophy and 'historical linguistics' are dealt with, the lion's share of the sources surveyed is clearly devoted to empirical studies. Apart from manuscripts (the considerable majority of which are preserved in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library in Hannover) and treatises published by Leibniz (either during his lifetime or posthumously), Luckscheiter's survey also exhibits a useful list of printed books containing Leibniz's marginal remarks.

A number of recent studies have investigated for what reasons Leibniz was interested in natural languages in the first place. A

<sup>6</sup> Since Davillé's *Leibniz historien* (1909), Eckhardt has suffered from a poor academic reputation (see e.g. Gensini 2000a and the references given there). Both Erdner (2003, 2004) and Wallnig (2012) rendered a more positive judgment.

<sup>7</sup> See however Waldhoff (2014). I have not been able to see the unpublished study by Buerner (1971), which is entirely dedicated to the *Collectanea*.



welcome starting point for tackling this issue is recent work that has been conducted on a voluminous and fascinating unpublished etymological dictionary belonging to Leibniz's legacy. As remarked by Waldhoff (2014: 271), the question regarding to what extent Leibniz – besides his innumerable additional interests – had genuine lexicographical ambitions was posed first after discovering the manuscript Ms IV 471, entitled *Lexicon Etymologicon, compositum e schedulis Leibnitii, Eccardi aliorumque*. Both John Considine and Stephan Waldhoff have recently explored the background of this four-volume manuscript, the ca. 1400 folios of which contain «numerous slips in different hands pasted onto both sides of the leaves» (Considine 2011: 218). After offering a short physical description, Considine discusses the materials' multilayered origins and the working method of the team members, one of whom was Leibniz<sup>8</sup>. Elaborating on Considine's paper, Waldhoff (2014) argues that Eckhardt, and not Leibniz, should be seen as the proper instigator of the dictionary project. Waldhoff subsequently contends that Eckhardt had utilized Leibniz's slips for purposes other than Leibniz's intent. Originally, these linguistic slips formed part of Leibniz's historical project, which was significantly more ambitious, in time depth as well as in the range of topics discussed, than his sponsor had hoped for (cf. Scheel 1968). Waldhoff's emphasis on the fundamental connection between Leibniz's linguistic and antiquarian research in the frame of his *Opus historicum* (see also Waldhoff 2008: 163) is echoed in Van Hal's (2014) contribution to the same volume. He offers an extensive survey of testimonials in which Leibniz expressed his idea that languages constitute the key sources for writing prehistory<sup>9</sup>. In addition, he demonstrates that Leibniz was likely indebted to previous scholars for developing this idea, although he was undoubtedly the first scholar initiating such a large-scale research project in earnest, thus inspiring later scholars to pursue his undertaking. The impact of Leibniz's program is also thoroughly discussed in the ethnological work of Han Vermeulen (1996, 2012, 2015), who has convincingly shown that many scholars interested in early Russian history, such as August Ludwig von

<sup>8</sup> See now also Considine (2014: 92-8). Considine (2008) outlines how Leibniz fostered dictionary projects initiated by his peers.

<sup>9</sup> Luckscheiter (2014b) contains some additional testimonials expressing the same idea.

Schlözer (1735-1809) and Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705-1783), were eager to further pursue Leibniz's project (Leibniz' linguistic ethnological program is succinctly mentioned in several other contributions, such as in Trautmann 2000: 560-1). In a number of his publications (the most recent of which is Trabant 2012: 120-4), Jürgen Trabant has demonstrated, on the other hand, how Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) indirectly criticized Leibniz for regarding language as a mere instrumental tool for uncovering history and prehistory. Trabant's work is cited – and not challenged – by Roldán (2005), although she seems to be more optimistic as to Leibniz's view on language as a nearly independent object worthy of study in itself. In addition, she suggests that Leibniz was interested in the plurality of natural languages primarily for cognitive rather than for historical reasons<sup>10</sup>. Roldán argues that the plurality of languages in Leibniz's view warrants a plurality of gateways to the truth<sup>11</sup>, while also contributing to his general ethical project. In any case most present-day scholars do underline that Leibniz's interest in, as well as enthusiasm for, the diversity of the natural languages was philosophically underpinned<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, the question remains whether one could simply disregard phrases such as: «J'ay peu ou plus tost point de connoissance des langues au de là de ce qui m'est necessaire, mais j'ay seulement fait quelques reflexions sur leur harmonie pour raisonner sur l'origine des peuples» (A 1692 Letter to Simon de la Loubère; A I, 8 N. 171, 291-7 [295]). Such phrases seem to suggest that Leibniz at least in the frame of his historical project regarded the natural languages as 'passive' empirical source materials rather than as 'active' cognitive devices.

Leibniz was not only aware of the differences between languages, but also of the transformations one language could undergo throughout time. Poser (2005: 114-6; 2000: 19) attaches consider-

<sup>10</sup> «Mais on ne peut pas en conclure que l'intérêt de Leibniz pour la recherche de l'origine des langues était "purement historique", comme pourrait le faire penser le titre d'un article des *Miscellanea Berolinensia* sur la recherche de l'origine des peuples [viz. the *Brevis Designatio*» (Roldán 2005: 330; see also p. 332).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. in this respect Cook (2008: 149).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Pombo (1996: 168) and Haßler & Neis (2009: 786, *sub voce* 'Besonderer Character einer Sprache'): «Die Unterschiede zwischen den einzelnen Sprachen sind nach Leibniz nicht einfach spezifische Entwicklungen, sondern sie sind ebenso notwendig, wie die Vielheit der Monaden zur möglichst vielfältigen Erfassung der Welt notwendig ist».

able importance to Leibniz's optimistic thoughts about the flexibility and changeability of the natural languages. Whereas most contemporary scholars thought about language change in terms of corruption, Leibniz was convinced that the development of language led to an improvement of thinking. In his eyes, this was a clear asset of the natural languages if compared to the static nature of philosophical languages. As he extensively explained in his German treatises, civilians could actively help improve languages by extending its richness and polishing its purity and brightness (Poser 2000: 20; see also Haßler & Neis 2009 *sub voce* Normierung). This remarkably progressive view on language change also has significant repercussions on his ideas on the primeval language (see Gensini 1999 and Dutz 1989, and Strasser 2011 for a recent overview in context). Although Leibniz did not doubt the monogenetic nature of language, he was convinced that this «Adamic language was certainly unknown to us», precisely through this endless process of flexibly adapting over the course of time. Even if one would be able to retrieve the primeval language, it would be of little use, given that this first language should not be regarded as a 'perfect language', as scholars typically tended to assume (see also Pektas 2005). This also implies that, in contrast to the majority of his contemporary peers, Leibniz was deeply convinced that Hebrew could not be the primeval language<sup>13</sup>.

This brings us to a final topic, viz. Leibniz's relationship with specific languages or language groups. After showing that Leibniz had only a basic command of the Hebrew language<sup>14</sup>, Cook (2008) argues that Leibniz's interest in Hebrew was not due to its alleged magical nature, despite the considerable attention paid to the Kabbalah (*pace* Coudert 1995). In Leibniz's view, knowing Hebrew contributed considerably to the defense of Christianity, to the conversion of the Jews, and in particular to the understanding of the Old Testament, which Leibniz regarded as one (but not the only) 'truth-bearing' source-text (Cook 2008: 152). It is well known that

<sup>13</sup> This idea is, of course, well known, but it is Cook's (2008: 137) merit to have collected a number of these passages. Likewise, Leibniz also criticizes the *Graecissantes* (see Gensini 2000c: 134).

<sup>14</sup> It is very helpful that Antognazza pays due attention to Leibniz's command of languages throughout her biography (see e.g. Antognazza 2009: 33 for Latin, 94 for English).



Leibniz made a firm distinction between the 'Aramaic' languages on the one hand and the 'Celto-Scythian' on the other. Li (2014b) discusses Leibniz's well-known interest in the languages and script system of China. His contribution reveals with what enormous difficulties Leibniz had to manage in order to obtain reliable information on the Chinese language, which he did not master himself, and how he attempted to establish an effective collaborative project allowing scholars throughout the world to gain new knowledge. Reasons of space prevent me from discussing in depth Leibniz's contributions to identifying both the Finno-Ugric and the Basque language group (see the chapter "Leibniz et l'unité finno-ougrienne" in Droixhe 2007: 192-212; Wessel 2003-2004; and Zulaika Hernández 2010). Groenewald (2004) highlights the documentary importance of the Khoi<sup>15</sup> prayer published in Leibniz's *Collectanea Etymologica* and convincingly argues that its provenance can be traced to Jan Wilhelm van Grevenbroek, who noted it down with the assistance of a certain captain Dorha (see now also Den Besten 2010).

### 3. Further steps

Besides providing us with welcome answers, the studies undertaken in the course of the last twenty years have in turn elicited many new questions as well. There is much more work to be done, and this section can do no more than make a few suggestions. First of all, one cannot but hope that funding will soon be obtained allowing editors to finally commence working on the fifth series in the Leibniz edition, which will be devoted to both his historical and linguistic projects, whose interconnection has been highlighted, as we saw, in recent research<sup>16</sup>. The precious anthology of Babin &

<sup>15</sup> An extinct language spoken in present-day South Africa.

<sup>16</sup> Relying on his own findings, Waldhoff (2014: 310-1) concludes his contribution with formulating concrete advice for the editors of and contributors to this fifth series: «Die Zugehörigkeit zu, ja, fast möchte man sagen: das Aufgehen von Leibniz' sprachwissenschaftlichen Forschungen in diesem größerem Zusammenhang, der sich als polyhistorisch-antiquarisch und historisch beschreiben lässt, und die – nicht allein dadurch – erwachsenden Schwierigkeiten, das Gebiet seiner Sprachforschungen von seinen benachbarten Interessensgebieten abzugrenzen, führen schließlich vor Augen, dass man die Entscheidung, für die Edition von Leibniz' sprachwissenschaftlichen und historischen Schriften eine gemeinsame Reihe vorzusehen, keinesfalls als bloße und ohnehin nicht

Van den Heuvel (2004) should be regarded as an irresistible teaser in this regard (see also the impressive spadework done by Luck-scheiter 2014b). In a personal communication, Stefan Luck-scheiter announced that he intended to compile a comparable anthology on Leibniz's writings on the Gauls and the Germans. Needless to say, the growing number of published volumes in the first series (Leibniz's general letter exchange) casts increasing light on the details of and evolution in his linguistic interests and ideas. The decision taken by the several Leibniz's *Forschungsstellen* to pre-publish downloadable versions of upcoming volumes of the *Akademie Ausgabe* can, in this respect, only be applauded. Widmaier & Babin (2006), an edition and translation of Leibniz's China-related letters, deserves special mention, as the volume also includes numerous letters that have not been published yet in the *Akademie Ausgabe*.

As the present survey should have made clear, several contributions in Li (2014c) have highlighted Leibniz's insistence on the significance of languages as testimonials for uncovering the prehistory of mankind. To the best of my knowledge, however, a systematic study exploring *how* Leibniz wanted to realize his ambitious comparative undertaking is, so far, lacking. Nevertheless, he offered some guidelines in this regard (e.g., by collecting the Lord's Prayer and a list of 'basic vocabulary' in as many languages as possible, as well as by formulating some basic etymological rules). Such a thorough research project, devoted to Leibniz's linguistic methodology, should likewise consider the methodological principles developed by earlier and contemporary authors, many of whom have served as inspiring sources. In addition, it would also be noteworthy to explore to what extent Leibniz impacted the methodological debate and what criticisms have been expressed by later scholars<sup>17</sup>. A too one-sided focus on Leibniz and a neglect of the broader context could risk to lead to what is sometimes styled *Höhenkammhistoriographie* (see Van Hal 2014: 178), thus eclipsing the contributions of

mehr zu ändernde Verlegenheitslösung akzeptieren sollte. Vielmehr gilt es, mit jener fünften Reihe der *Sämtlichen Schriften und Briefe*, die als einzige noch nicht begonnen worden ist, die Chance zu ergreifen, den ursprünglichen Argumentationszusammenhang des "Opus historicum" in seiner ganzen Breite zu rekonstruieren».

<sup>17</sup> To give just one example, Van Hal (2015) discusses the thought-provoking criticisms on Leibniz expressed in Gedike (1785). As rightly remarked by Farahmand (2012: 235), it is in many cases difficult to underpin and to substantiate the influence exerted by Leibniz on later authors.

earlier, contemporary, and later scholars and overlooking the dynamics of the transmission of knowledge (see also Gensini 2000b: 105 and Babin 2014 for his discussion of the concepts expressed by Mathurin Veyssière de la Croze). Future research could also pay more attention to Leibniz's documentary sources. Luckscheiter's (2014b) survey of sources includes, for instance, the important book by Marcus Zuerius Boxhornius (1612-1653) on the origins of the Gauls (*Origines Gallicae*, 1654). The front page of Leibniz's annotated copy reveals that this book originally belonged to the legacy of the polymath Martin Fogelius (1634-1675), who was also especially interested in the interrelationship between the world's languages and whose extensive collection of paper slips was a crucial documentary source for Leibniz (Considine 2011: 218). Fogelius's linguistics views and their influence on Leibniz warrant a more thorough study. The fine example of Groenewald (2004) could invite other scholars to trace the backgrounds of the text specimens and vocabulary catalogues collected at instigation of Leibniz (see Van Hal 2011 for another case study).

Whereas recent publications have emphasized the importance of studying Leibniz's views on the natural languages in close connection with his ideas on language in general and also in view of his ambitious *opus historicum*, it remains to be studied more in depth how his interest in the natural languages fits in with what Antognazza (2009) views as his underlying life project, viz. the improvement of the world<sup>18</sup>. As a matter of fact, many of Leibniz's letters testify to his unfailing zeal in bridging people's differences without ironing them out. Some of these letters indeed reveal how Leibniz attempts at fruitfully bringing together not only languages and religions, but also scholars and 'fieldworkers' throughout the world in his notable endeavor to launch an ambitious collaborative scholarly enterprise<sup>19</sup>. Establishing a present-day collaborative scholarly enterprise is a prerequisite both for understanding the full width, implications, and impact of Leibniz's master plan in general and for better appreciating the roles ascribed to the natural languages in particular.

<sup>18</sup> See in this respect also Roldán (2005).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., the striking letter directed to Antoine Verjus S.J. on 15.08.1705 (Widmaier & Babin 2006: 468-82).

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